

REALIST MELODRAMA AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY

Billy Woodberry's Bless Their Little Hearts

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In the aftermath of the Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992, Billy Woodberry's film *Bless Their Little Hearts* of a decade earlier stands as one of the most compelling recent works presenting the dynamics of African-American consciousness. This study of a family facing the economic, social and personal realities of unemployment in the Los Angeles black community shows the private sphere, the domestic side of the public events which erupted in an explosive contest with state power and authority and an assault on commercial property following the acquittal of the police accused of beating Rodney King.

I want to use this film as a reference point for discussing realist melodrama, a film and theatrical form which has been frequently attacked, dismissed, and ignored in recent years. Considered hopelessly bound to the 'monstrous delusion' of realism, to use Peter Wollen's phrase,¹ by proponents of a Brechtian aesthetic, hopelessly old-fashioned by adherents of avant-garde narrative, and forgotten by post-modernists, realist melodrama nevertheless remains one of the perennially popular forms used by artists seeking to depict the unrepresented and misrepresented. Why is this so? The all-too-easy answer is that such dramatists, film- and video-makers naively believe in the power of realism and uncritically accept the narrative logic of melodrama. I find that answer itself naive, however, for it ignores certain demonstrable powers and appeals of the form.

First, a few clarifications. *Bless Their Little Hearts* is a black and white feature film made from a script by Charles Burnett, who is also the film's cinematographer. Burnett is the writer and director of the independent narratives *Killer of Sheep* and *My Brother's Wedding*, and the Hollywood feature *To Sleep With Anger*. *Bless Their Little Hearts* appeared in 1983 at the end of a first wave of new independent film-making in Los Angeles by African-Americans, a movement characterised by critic Clyde Taylor as the 'LA Rebellion'.² This aesthetic rebellion against the conventional presentation of African-Americans by Hollywood was influenced by UCLA professor Teshome Gabriel who lectured on, presented, and wrote about Third Cinema in the Third World (in his book of that title), and it produced important films by Haile Gerima, Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Alile

Sharon Larkin, Ben Caldwell, and Larry Clark. Woodberry is also a UCLA graduate and *Bless Their Little Hearts* was his master's degree project. I find the film one of the most accomplished of this group of fascinating and important works.

In summary, the story covers several months in the life of a family, centring on the father, Charlie. Recently unemployed, he finds casual work but no steady job. His wife, Andais, exhausted from her own job, domestic chores, and coping with the reduced income, avoids his sexual advances. Charlie takes up with another woman, but when she demands more time, money and responsibility from him, the affair ends. He returns home to what becomes the film's most highly charged scene: a ten-minute quarrel in a small kitchen filmed with a hand-held continuous wide-angle shot. Charlie later goes fishing and realises that he could sell the fish, and with his buddies does so, hawking them at the roadside, but at the film's end he walks away, providing his answer to the moment of moral decision that he described early in the film: at a certain point in life one has to choose between the material and the spiritual.

Second, I want to narrow the broad term 'melodrama' for this discussion. I see melodrama as a protean form, occupying many different spaces at different times. Without denying recent reminders of the action/adventure/sensation tradition of the form, I am particularly concerned here with the domestic melodrama tradition of the bourgeois era, which has a fairly coherent historical and social existence. In this context, melodrama finds a long and varied expression in paying attention to and validating the significance of personal, familial, and workgroup social relations. Descended from the French *drame* of the 18th century, beginning with Diderot's *Le Père*, the domestic melodrama, while robbed of the awesome destiny of classical and neo-classical tragedy, finds its viewer's fascination in the changing dynamics of human relationships on the everyday scale and with (relatively) ordinary people. As I have argued elsewhere it operates on the unresolved and unresolvable tension between a capitalist society on the one hand and personal and familiar needs and aspirations on the other.³

Third, I want to clarify my understanding of the term 'realism'. Realism has a bad name today for some good reasons and a few bad ones. Certainly the current critical catechism with its repeated formula that everything is constructed within discourse, culture, and ideology seems to dismiss the animating base of a realist aesthetic and epistemology. I hardly want to go back to a traditional left politics or aesthetics to justify realism, but the post-structural/post-modernist spin on realism itself contains a certain naiveté and problem which is that it cannot explain the undeniable power of realism except as a 'monstrous delusion' perpetrated by an insidious culture industry, or, in a more whimsical version, as a familiar pleasure, a set of codes producing a happy consciousness.

From such positions it is impossible to see that highly conscious, theoretically knowledgeable, politically critical artists might actually choose realism as an aesthetic strategy (one of many) in order to achieve certain results that cannot be attained by other strategies which themselves have their own limitations. I am thinking here of choices such as the Brecht-Godardian counter-cinema, the avant-garde New Narrative, the

punk and post-punk transgression, the post-modern parody and pastiche, the slickly commercial, and so forth. That each of these strategies has potentials and liabilities, that each of them should be or could be part of the repertoire of the culturally current master artist, is a post-modern insight that not all have yet attained.

Bless Their Little Hearts uses various conventional codes of realism in the general style of Italian neo-realism: black and white cinematography, frequent and noticeable use of hand-held camera in location shooting, actual locations, lighting which approximates the location's given illumination, depiction of ordinary characters in ordinary settings, speech marked by dialect, some unprofessional actors, 'unpleasant' topics, and working-class as opposed to middle-class life. It also makes a number of innovations, and we could use these to claim that the film goes beyond the 'referential illusion', to use Barthes's phrase for the discourse of realism. We find frequent use of low camera positions, often approximating that of a child's view, especially in the interiors, as well as static shots held for a significant amount of time after the key action has taken place, resulting in an emphasis on duration and space within the shot (in interviews, cinematographer Burnett has expressed his interest in Ozu). Such techniques complement and extend the realism, but in a way which veers away from conventional shot and editing rhythms. They vary drastically from the norms of classical Hollywood cinema taken as a dominant form of realism, and they also vary from the conventions of Italian neo-realism or British realism. Thus, depending on the viewer's familiarity with codes and adeptness at code-switching, they may be taken as even more 'realistic' (that is, closer to the existing nature of the referent) in foregrounding temporal and spatial matters.

In addition, the film has certain markers of independent, very low-budget, dramatic film-making: some shots are included which are technically flawed, probably in the lab processing, and some of the voicetrack audio is so low that lines are lost. In addition, since no credits are given for the music, one suspects that existing recorded music was used but that rights were not cleared, another typical characteristic of independent low-budget work.⁴ To some extent these markers also help to situate the film within the realist mode since they are also familiar to viewers of similar realistic coded works.

All of this fits the close observation of everyday detail in visuals, speech and character actions that remain central to a realist aesthetic. At the same time, it is important to distinguish this use of realism from that version of realism which pushes to a naturalist position. Using many of the same techniques, naturalism proceeds in a steadily, inexorably downward narrative movement, towards stasis and inevitability at the end. Naturalism has been so often maligned by the political right and left and by commercial and avant-garde sectors that we may actually forget its political basis and its current variant manifestations. Of its politics, Bertolt Brecht pointed out that naturalism has a progressive aspect in that it shows that something is profoundly wrong with society, although it cannot provide any insight or perspective on how those problems might change or be changed.⁵ Because it effectively evacuates human agency or portrays col-

lective action as finally futile, naturalism comes to a static end-game. In terms of its current versions, I can mention Chantal Akermann's film, *Jeanne Dielmann, 23 rue de commerce*, as a perfect modernist example of naturalist melodrama with a *coup de théâtre* ending.

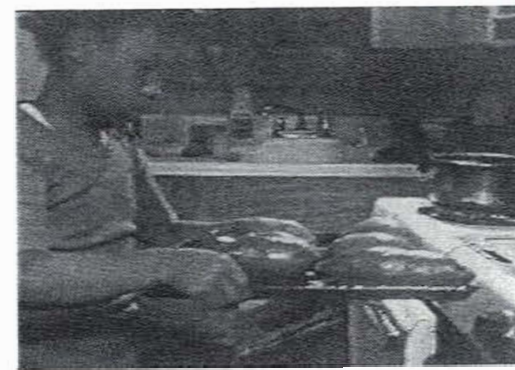
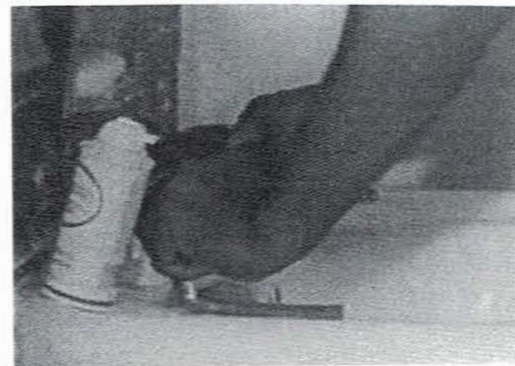
At moments *Bless Their Little Hearts* could be taken as naturalist, and critic Edward Guerrero gives the film's ending such a reading:

By the film's close, [Charlie] has replaced his version of dominant ideology, that of middle-class optimism and mobility through individual effort, with its underclass counterpoint, an outlook by which he perceives himself as socially worthless, economically discarded, and psychologically defeated.⁶

The clearest statement that the film's dramatic dilemma is due to externals that inexorably wear down the protagonists takes place during the husband-wife quarrel. The fight is based in the double bind of the wife's repeated statement that she is tired of the current situation brought on by unemployment and underemployment and the husband's claim that he cannot make 'the Man' give him a job. Clearly the external situation is the determinant one in the last instance, a point made lyrically in a sequence of Charlie after a casual job clearing weeds from vacant land. As he rides home in a pick-up truck, industrial buildings move past him. One privileged shot shows a half-demolished factory, itself the symbol of an industrial economy in decay, and the emphatic point of the visual sequence which shows his exclusion from relatively well-paying factory work.' On the soundtrack we hear a woman singing a blues song: 'Lost in a dream/And I just can't find my way'.

However, the film does not present a consistent downward movement. Some individual episodes reverse the expectation. For example, when Charlie shaves one morning, he looks in the mirror in a conventional narrative symbolisation of self-examination, self-searching. He then completes the cleaning ritual by turning off the water taps (see A). The degree of his frustration is expressed in the force of the closing. His older daughter then enters to wash and, finding the taps impossible to open, gets a huge wrench and lightly hits on the handles to open them. The moment is comic and telling, for here and elsewhere the children function as those who must fit 'in between' the parents' frustrations and stresses. Here they do so successfully, though at many other points it is clear that they end up mimicking the parents' behaviours, and often the most destructive parts.

Bless Their Little Hearts also maintains the dialectical form of realist narration, as opposed to the negative determinism of naturalism, by use of socially significant gesture and detail. In one such moment Angie, the oldest daughter, perhaps nine, helps prepare dinner. She carefully places large potatoes in the oven to bake (see B) and secures the door with a piece of wire. The details are significant in context: mother asleep after work; father out of the house; potatoes an inexpensive but filling carbohydrate; baking them a preparation a child can master; her labour is part of what children in poor families must contribute to domestic work. Finally, the



Film stills A-C from *Bless Their Little Hearts*
(Billy Woodberry, 1982)

wire is also telling. This is a family who must use an old stove with a broken door catch and then cope with a serviceable if inelegant repair. In a more extended narrative scene Charlie is shown painting his graffiti-covered garage (see C). He proceeds methodically and one senses the purposefulness of the work and the self-satisfaction at the end of the job. Thus both his willingness to work and pride in accomplishment is demonstrated, underlining the source of his unemployment as the economic structure rather than personal traits.

By placing the quarrel, the deepest moment of crisis, two-thirds into the film, the subsequent episodes serve to redeem the pessimism. Fishing, like the earlier garage painting, is shown as a lyrical moment of self-directed accomplishment. In a key moment, after his daughter has suffered a broken arm (the specific event is not clear, but Charlie's speech at that point makes it clear that he attributes the cause to their neighbourhood), Charlie apologises that he cannot make enough money to have the family live in a better place and breaks down crying. This display of the injury to his pride and exhibition of his frustration provides a cathartic moment which re-establishes the family bonding with children and wife (who comforts him).

The momentum of realism in *Bless Their Little Hearts* is tempered by the dynamics of melodrama. The protagonist's moral decision is frankly indicated at the very beginning when Charlie tells his friends, who casually talk about robbery as a potential source of income, that one must choose between the spiritual and the material (see D). The open expression of emotion and the narrative's repeated presentation of the masculine crisis re-contexted through the effects on the wife and children allows for a greater understanding of family dynamics. The family drama is clear in *Bless Their Little Hearts*, but is also presented as a dilemma. At the end, Charlie sees his friends' antics in trying to stop cars as playing the fool.⁸ His choice to reject the pursuit of materialism which turns man into a buffoon is clearly the right thing, but what decisions the rest of the family makes are not examined with the same attention. Because Kaycee Moor who plays Andais, the wife, is the actor with the most screen presence in the film, her character is strong and convincing, but her psychology is barely sketched in. The moral choice is privileged with the husband.

These too are the marks of melodrama: a drama of clear moral choices, appeals to morality and sentiment, the potential pathos of seeing the effects of bad actions on innocent children and defenceless women, a clearly marked villain (the Man), a reconciliation and endorsement of the family, episodic construction, emphasis on emotional moments over narrative explanation, and so forth. Why, then, to return to my earlier question, would some artists choose to use this dramatic form when it seems so quickly dated and artificial and even dishonest when we look at examples from the past? I think the answer is, first, that melodrama is usually so strongly time-bound to its own moment of production because it uses the social commonplaces of its current time as an unthinking referential and moral norm in a way that is both its power and its liability. Second, in extension, it is useful for the dramatic artist precisely because it articulates those social commonplaces so well, so 'naturally' in its construction,



Film stills D-E from *Bless Their Little Hearts*
(Billy Woodberry, 1982)

that it gains a profound psychological resonance in the audience of its own time, especially when reinforced by depictions of the audience's own class, gender and ethnicity. It works on the power of recognition and in two ways: in its realist dimension it provides recognition of the familiar, the everyday, the otherwise taken-for-granted, and in its emotional dimension it validates the frequently experienced as well as what is emotionally desirable, but sometimes unattainable. It is gratifying to see that Charlie will do the right thing and leave his friends' materialism behind. It is gratifying to see that a husband's sexual wandering will be set right. It is gratifying to see that a man can cry in front of his family to express and relieve his humiliation.

This realist melodrama form avoids irony and self-reflection. It cannot claim the sophistication of playing stylisation against content to achieve the ironic distanciation claimed for Sirk, for example, but in its plain frankness, in its direct validation of the everyday and everyday desires, it speaks powerfully and directly of that which is unrepresented, misrepresented.

sented, and underrepresented in the dominant culture's depiction of the exploited. The film indicates that Charlie must make a moral decision, one that may go against his immediate desires, to bring money home for the family. In this way the film's moral standard, its authorial voice, speaks across to Charlie as an equal, not down to him as a victim. We are not so very far here from the judgment we are asked to pass on Mother Courage.

My understanding of the film differs significantly from Guerrero's analysis. While we agree on the film's value and achievement, Guerrero reads the film as a pessimistic, naturalist story focusing on the theme of African-American manhood as expressed by the character Charlie: 'Woodberry's film relentlessly unfolds to explore a spectrum of shrinking possibilities, foreclosed options and futile actions, occurring between the poles of the ideal and the material, that by the film's end prove Charlie wrong.'⁹ Drawing on an analysis of the film as very close in style and spirit to the Italian neo-realist classic *Bicycle Thieves* as centrally presenting the dilemma of, respectively, the working-class and poor African-American male, and drawing on Fredric Jameson's Marxist discussion of the 'political unconscious' in works of narrative art, Guerrero draws a strong conclusion:

Of course we've seen these black men warehoused on all the corners and vacant lots of America's inner cities and ghettos. That's the familiar. The art of Woodberry's film resides in the fact that by the time of its conclusion, we can no longer deny that we understand how these discarded, black men have come to be at such a hellish, desolate location. For the entire narrative is a crafted irruption of the socially and politically repressed leading out thoughts and emotions in this direction until, finally, we have been forced to see things differently.¹⁰

I agree with Guerrero that the film does this, but I think it also does more. I find that it functions like *Bicycle Thieves*' ending which affirms the strength of the human spirit, an argument most eloquently developed about De Sica's film by André Bazin.¹¹

Of course, Bazin's argument can be extended to a declaration of political quietism: ground down and defeated in the material world, the character triumphs in spiritual consciousness. In the case of *Bless Their Little Hearts*, however, I find that the film expresses the same type of dialectic as the blues. While on the surface about misfortune and hard times in love or life, the blues always also expresses the singer's strength in the face of adversity. The end of Woodberry's film is not a triumph of the spiritual, but simply a coming to terms with life. Charlie has learned, he is stronger, he has his dignity; he does not sell his manhood into the bondage of demeaning public behaviour to make some money. Furthermore, taking a larger narrative view, by looking at the family, at the wife and children, at the domestic space as a counterpoint to the realist drama of men in public space, we can see the film as even richer in its presentation. From the opening shots of Charlie in the unemployment office while 'Nobody Knows You (When You're Down and Out)' plays

on the soundtrack, to the final shots with Charlie returning home, where people do know him in all his weakness and strength, the film sings the affirmation of a blues discourse while also depicting the sorrows of South Central Los Angeles life.

Realist melodrama has a recurrent appeal to artists seeking to construct dramatic narratives about and for the oppressed. It has been frequently noted that Italian neo-realism can be easily seen as the dominant style influencing the New Latin American Cinema,¹² and specific examples, such as *Portrait of Teresa* (Cuba, 1979, directed by Pastor Vega), confirm the persistence of the melodramatic form. While it would be foolish to ignore the artistic and political limits of realist melodrama, it would be equally foolish to ignore the potentials. For communities for whom the family in various forms is a basic unit of survival, and yet also a focal point of distress caused by outside forces, realist melodrama provides an often acute political discourse. Caught in a contradiction that does not go away, oscillating between the family as 'haven in a heartless world', and families as 'worlds of pain',¹³ realist melodrama can speak profoundly about and to people struggling against capitalism's destruction of human values.

My thanks are due to Billy Woodberry, Charles Burnett, Julia Lesage, John Hess, Angela Martin, JoAnn Elam, Joe Hendrix, Zeinabu Irene Davis, and Christine Gledhill.

The film is available (on videotape) from Billy Woodberry, 1607 S. Shendoah, Los Angeles CA 90035; phone 213-205-0929.

Notes

1. Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 166.
2. Taylor used the phrase to label a January 1986 'New American Film-makers Series' he guest curated at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. The programme notes were reprinted: 'The LA Rebellion: A Turning Point in Black Cinema', *Black Film Review*, Spring 1986, pp. 4, 29. Taylor provides a useful survey in 'Decolonizing the Image: New US Black Cinema,' in Peter Steven (ed.), *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter-Cinema* (London: BFI, 1985).
3. Chuck Kleinhans, 'Notes on Melodrama and the Family under Capitalism', *Film Reader*, 3, 1978.
4. Without copyright permissions such films can still be easily shown in media art centres, festivals, and classroom screenings. However, for TV broadcast or commercial distribution, fees must be paid and music cleared. The most predominant music track is a saxophone and piano; the sax is played in the style of Sonny Criss, the late LA-based musician.
5. Brecht, quoted by Lee Baxandall, 'Brecht in America, 1935', *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, Fall 1967, p. 84.
6. Edward Guerrero, 'Negotiations of Ideology, Manhood, and Family in Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts*', *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 25, no. 2, Summer 1991, p. 316.
7. For a concise discussion of the Los Angeles economy and its impact on the African-American community, see Mike Davis, 'The LA Inferno', *Socialist*

- Review*, vol. 22, no. 1, Jan.–Mar., 1992, pp. 57–80. Davis's book-length study, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Random House, Vintage, 1992) provides the full context. Also of interest are Edward W. Soja's two chapters on Los Angeles in his *Post-modern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).
8. This is the most speculative part of my interpretation. There is no evidence in the dialogue that explains the character's action. Guerrero interprets this action as Charlie seeing himself as worthless and defeated. I read it as marking the moment of moral choice and coming to a new level of awareness and a return to his home, his family. I also differ from Guerrero on Charlie's history: I find dialogue that indicates that his unemployment is relatively recent, while Guerrero cites dialogue to conclude that it has lasted ten years. I see the film as strongly marked by Charles Burnett's screenplay, and I interpret it in relation to Burnett's other films as, for example, in the themes of sleeping and dreaming and the brief vignettes in neighbourhood locations.
 9. Guerrero, *op. cit.*, p. 316.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
 11. André Bazin, 'Bicycle Thief', in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).
 12. For a useful article outlining similarities and decisive differences, see John Hess, 'Neo-realism and the New Latin American Cinema: *Bicycle Thieves* and *Blood of the Condor*', in Manuel Alvarado, John King and Ana Lopez (eds.), *1492–1992: Mediating Two Worlds* (London: BFI, 1993).
 13. Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Lillian Breslow Rubin, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

From *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1994) 157–166.